

[Molly Walsh, Burlington Free Press](#)

Mary Post attended U.S. Rep. Peter Welch's Congress in Your Community event Saturday at Mac's Market for a special reason: To take a stand for the democratic process.

The shootings in Tucson, Ariz., last week must not keep people from participating in politics, the Essex resident said. "I'm just not going to be afraid. ... I think that's what is going to cripple us, is the fear."

Post was among 30 people who attended the meet, greet and debate session that went for over an hour in the crowded entryway of the market. Welch began by paying tribute to Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, who was critically injured by a lone gunman who targeted her at a shopping center public outreach session. Six people were killed and 13 wounded in the rampage that triggered national mourning and a call from President Barack Obama for renewed commitment to open democracy.

Welch explained that he and Giffords, a fellow Democrat, were part of the same Congressional class in 2006 and learned the ropes together. He praised her political tenacity, her civility and her good nature. "Everything you read about her in the paper, it's true," Welch said.

Like Giffords, he has staged many Congress in Your Community events — more than 90 since his election. Saturday's gathering was an affirmation of the philosophy that inspired the first sessions five years ago.

"The goal was what we're doing here — go and talk to people," Welch said.

Regular dialogue with Vermonters who are "dealing with the real world" has shaped Welch's positions on energy, credit card fees and other issues, he said. While Vermonters aren't shy about expressing their views or disagreeing with him — sometimes in a very blunt way, Welch said to laughs from the crowd — Vermont is a place where people on different sides of the

political spectrum work together. That's a good thing, Welch said. "It allows us to make progress."

As Saturday morning grocery shoppers passed by, some stopped to listen or weigh in. Others arrived with specific questions after reading that Welch would be holding the session. The people weren't shy about telling their political representative what to do: Reduce pharmaceutical industry influence on the Federal Food and Drug Administration, said one person. Support wind power, said another. Don't expect the public to approve the Obama health care law when many politicians didn't even read the text, said a third, to which Welch replied that for the record — he did read it.

Bruce Post, an Essex Selectboard member, said the town's application for a federally-funded ladder truck was rejected unfairly by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Could Welch look into it? Yes, the congressman said.

Karen Mendes of Essex Junction showed Welch a picture of the 18-month-¹ old girl she and her husband have adopted from Nepal but can't bring home because of a U.S. State Department visa freeze. Fighting back tears, Mendes asked if her congressman could help bring baby Margaret home. "We'll look into that," Welch said, after giving Mendes a hug.

Ray Tomlinson of Essex Junction said police should at least do a drive-by for Congress in the Community events. There was no visible police presence Saturday, but a Welch aide said law enforcement had been notified the session was taking place. Welch didn't have an easy answer for the security question. "I think it's hard to know, law enforcement can't be everywhere," he said.

Michael O'Leary of Williston told Welch he is deeply worried about the national debt. He urged Welch to support offshore oil drilling to generate revenue. "Open it up so we can get some jobs."

Afterwards, O'Leary said he appreciated the opportunity to tell his congressman how he feels. "I'm a Republican, a conservative. I believe you should pay for what you buy. "

O'Leary said more people should have been at Saturday's session. "I find it sad that people don't know democracy is not free. You have to participate in it." He praised Welch for hosting the session. "I think it was great. And I really think all representatives nationwide should do this."